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ABSTRACT

A path model was developed to assess the effects of early campaign cognitions and attitudes on media use and interpersonal communication, subsequent cognitions, attitudes, and vote. Two interpretations of possible outcomes were postulated: agenda setting, and uses and gratifications. It was argued that an agenda-setting interpretation would be typified by a predominant effect of the cognitive elements in the model, while a uses and gratifications interpretation would follow from a strong effect of the attitudinal components which would indicate the functioning of selective processes in the communications channel. The findings indicate a uses and gratifications interpretation best fits the data. Relatively stronger effects of attitudinal components on both interpersonal communication and media use and subsequent effect of attitude on vote suggest the functioning of selective processes. (Author)

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A PATH MODEL OF POLITICAL COGNITIONS AND ATTITUDES, COMMUNICATION, AND VOTING BEHAVIOR IN A CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

A path model was developed to assess the effects of early campaign cognitions and attitudes on media use and interpersonal communication, subsequent cognitions, attitudes, and vote. Two interpretations of possible outcomes were postulated--agenda-setting and uses and gratifications. It was argued that an agenda-setting interpretation would be typified by a predominant effect of the cognitive elements in the model while a uses and gratifications interpretation would follow from a strong effect of the attitudinal components which would indicate the functioning of selective processes in the communications channels.

The findings indicate a uses and gratifications interpretation best fits the data. Relatively stronger effects of attitudinal components on both interpersonal communication and media use and subsequent effect of attitude on vote suggest the functioning of selective processes.

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A PATH MODEL OF POLITICAL COGNITIONS AND ATTITUDES, COMMUNICATION AND VOTING BEHAVIOR IN A CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION

The direct effect of the mass media on the electorate has long been a staple topic for public worry. McCombs and Shaw (1972) delineated the apparent potential of the media to determine exceptionally high associations between what the media report as being "important" and what the voters perceived as "important" in a presidential campaign. This apparent direct effect they labeled the agenda-setting function of the media. Agenda-setting has been reported by a number of subsequent investigators, and an argument has arisen over whether agenda-setting outcomes can be best interpreted in the context of direct effects or from the standpoint of uses and gratifications.

However, it does not seem to us that both direct effects and uses and gratifications can be appropriately labeled agenda-setting function of the media. Where there is a demonstrable direct effect, we would consider the outcome an agenda-setting effect. Where there is a demonstrable uses and gratifications outcome, the effect is a function of the audience, not the media, and uses and gratifications cannot be considered agenda-setting. The study reported here examines some relationships among cognitions, attitudes, communications, and voting behavior in one attempt to assess the potential of the two arguments.[1]

In the model tested here, an agenda-setting effect can be viewed as a function of the cognitive variables and the communications channels. In this situation the attitudinal variables should show relatively small effects on the outcomes of the model. If the primary function is one of uses and gratifications, the major effect should be from the attitudinal component through the communications channels, and the direct effects of the cognitions should be minimal. Further, a uses and gratifications outcome should clearly imply the operation of the selective processes in the communications channels.

The literature has produced both consistent outcomes and some apparent inconsistencies. For example, newspaper emphasis of issues is consistently reported to be more highly correlated with audience saliency rankings of issues than is television agenda. However, the role of interpersonal communication in the agenda-setting process is unclear. A priori it would seem that the greater the interpersonal communication the less the direct effect of the media and the smaller the agenda-setting potential as the information from the media becomes diluted by person-to-person communication. McCombs, Shaw, and Shaw (1972) did find newspaper agenda-setting declined as interpersonal discussion of issues increased. Mullins (1973), on the other hand, found frequency of discussion of issues was positively related to agenda-setting and that interest in politics was not related to media agenda-setting. Kline (1973) reported that interpersonal discussion was a consequence of individual salience of agenda items. Shaw (1974) also found frequency of discussion positively related to agenda-setting, but he reported interest in the election was positively related to agenda-setting. McLeod, Becker and Byrnes (1974) found agenda-setting most evident among those least interested in politics.

Demonstrations of the agenda-setting effect, while important in themselves from a communications point of view, gain additional social significance to the extent that we can specify outcomes subsequent to agenda-setting, and again the literature reports contradictory outcomes. McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) found that salient agenda items had an impact on voter choice of candidates

while Kovenok, Beardsley, and Prothro (1970) found no evidence that agenda predicted vote choice. Becker and Towers (1976) reported attitudes were a better predictor of political behavior than were cognitions, and the emphasis in agenda-setting research has been on the information voters hold rather than upon their attitudes.

It is assumed that voters have an early campaign agenda, however weakly ordered it might be. By early campaign we mean prior to the major media advertising effort (mid-September in terms of the election studied). The voters' agenda consists of cognitions and attitudes about candidates, parties, and issues. Statements about a candidate (e.g., He is a Democrat. He wears a bow tie.) constitute cognitions while the evaluations placed on those cognitions (e.g., I like/dislike him because he is a Democrat.) provide the attitudinal context. Thus, each individual cognition can have an evaluative component. The arrangement is similar to the position taken by Becker, McCombs, and McLeod (1975) in that attitudes are summary evaluations about objects by individuals while cognitions are stored information about those objects. The media provide information, the agenda, while the media user places evaluations on that information. Benton and Frazier (1975) found that pro-con rationales comprised one of three levels of agenda-setting.

The positive paths from early cognitions to mass media and interpersonal communication are based on the positive relationships between need for orientation and media use described by McCombs (1973) and Weaver (1974). Sanders and Atwood (1975) found that specific orientational needs grow out of the voters' early campaign decisional agenda, and that agenda items for candidates create stronger orientational needs than do party agenda items. These linkages are based on the assumption that media content and interpersonal communication are important sources of information for cognitive mapping (Weaver, 1974).

The positive paths from early campaign attitudes to mass media and interpersonal communication are also based on the positive relationship between need for orientation and information seeking described by the Sears and Whitney (1970) influence model and assumes that if an individual is not in a state of balance toward an attitudinal object (in this case a political candidate) then he is motivated to talk about that object or otherwise seek information that will allow him to attain a state of balance. Thus, if an individual is in a state of imbalance due to conflicting or insufficient information, he will use the media and interpersonal channels to help orient hemself. Of course, the individual could leave the field as a means of solving the cognitive imbalance and withdraw from further consideration of the campaign.

Where a person already has made a decision of candidate preference (he is in a post-decisional state), the content of the media and interpersonal channels are assumed to provide major sources of reinforcement for that decision. A number of studies (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1948; McLeod, Ward, and Tancill, 1965; Chaffee and McLeod, 1967; Becker and Preston, 1969 among others) have reported that voters who have made a decision are heavier users of the media than are those who are undecided.

Information supportive of the decision already made can be used to "fill in" the cognitive spaces around that decision, and information not supportive of the decision can be ignored. For voters who have not made a decision, the selective processes are much less likely to occur. Cognitive dissonance theory

argues that supportive information is sought and information not supportive of a decision is avoided. The evidence tends to support the theory for persons who have made a decision, but for those who have not made a decision the selective processes tend not to occur as information relevant to reaching a decision is sought.

One of the largely unaddressed questions about the presumed information seeking is one of the extent to which the seeking is active search behavior as opposed to passive recognition. Atkin (1972) refers to the question as one of information search vs. information receptivity and reported that where a person anticipates future conversation about a topic some active search behavior occurs. On the whole, it seems unlikely that most congressional campaigns, such as the one examined here, will create much active information seeking. More likely, the voter becomes aware of an apparent anomaly and thus becomes sensitive to relevant campaign messages that otherwise would have been ignored.

The reciprocal relationship postulated in the model between interpersonal communication and mass media use is based on findings showing correlations between media use and interpersonal communication. Most of these studies have reported one-time correlations from which no direction can be inferred. Atkin (1974) reported a reciprocal causal relationship between political interest and knowledge and mass media use. Sohn (1976) reported a causal time-lagged correlation between what residents in a community reported talking about and what they read in the local newspaper. Weaver (1974) has argued that no direction should be specified since media use and interpersonal communication are probably complementary and mutually reinforcing sources of political information.

The positive paths from media use and interpersonal communication follow from the findings of Sanders and Atwood (1975) and Hantz and Kimsey (1976) who found that voters reported being exposed to up to four times as many political commercials and twice as many political conversations in late October as they did in mid-September. Consequently, these voters reported a greater number of items of information about the candidates in October than they did in September. Kelley and Mirer (1968) reported similar findings.

These paths from media use also follow from the findings of McCombs, Shaw, and Shaw (1972); Mullins (1973); McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974); Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman (1975); and McClure and Patterson (1974). These studies generally reported increased media exposure with increased similarity of respondent agendas and media agendas. Finally, the positive paths to vote from cognitions and attitudes about the candidate follow from the findings of Kelley and Mirer (1968); Becker and McLeod (1974); Sanders and Atwood (1975); and Becker and Towers (1976). The analysis that follows attempts to empirically verify the causal paths among the variables as specified in the initial model (see Figure 1).

Method

The data were gathered between September 14-21 and October 26-November 4, 1974 in the five largest counties of the 24th Congressional District of Illinois. A systematic sample of 500 numbers was drawn from all telephone directories in the five counties. Of the sample, 141 persons were interviewed in both September and October. In addition, 80 new members were selected in October in order to estimate possible sensitization of the panel respondents

with the September interview. There was no indication of contamination on the six measures tested.

The questions eliciting the cognitions and attitudinal information were:

1. Is there anything in particular about the Democratic candidate . . . that might make you want to vote for him?

2. Is there anything in particular about the Democratic candidate . . . that might make you want to vote against him?

Cognitions were defined as the total set of statements for and against each candidate and assumed values ranging from zero to eight (up to four favorable and four unfavorable statements were recorded). Attitude was defined as the number of favorable statements about a candidate minus the number of unfavorable statements. Attitude could assume values ranging from plus four to minus four. Pomper (1975) reports similar use of this type of question as an indicator of candidate evaluation.

Media exposure was measured by a series of questions asking whether or not the respondent remembered seeing or hearing any campaign messages regarding the Democratic candidate or his campaign in newspapers, on radio or on television. Within each media channel a determination was made as to whether the message was an advertisement or a news story and what these messages said (a maximum of four each were recorded for news and advertising). These were summed to provide the index of media exposure. The number of different topics about the candidate and the campaign respondents remembered discussing was used as the index of interpersonal communication. The cognitive elements are measures of information holding, and the media and interpersonal communication elements are measures of message discrimination (Clarke and Kline, 1974). Vote intention was measured by asking: "if the election were held today, for whom would you vote?" The question was asked both in September and in October.

Path analysis was used to test the model. The object in path analysis is to specify the network of causal paths that exist among variables and to identify the parameters of causation so that one knows how changes in one variable affect the values of the other variables in the system. The path coefficients reported represent direct impact of one variable upon another after controlling for the indirect effects of the other variables in the model (Duncan, 1975). The variables listed in order of time priority (from left to right) in Figure 1 are:

X_1 = early cognitions about the Deomcratic candidate (information holding)

X_2 = early attitude toward the Democratic candidate

X_3 = political party identification

X_4 = mass media exposure (message discrimination)

X_5 = interpersonal communication (message discrimination)

X_6 = late cognitions about the Democratic candidate (information holding)

X_7 = late attitude toward Democratic candidate

Y_1 = intention to vote for Democratic candidate

There are four blocks of variables (see Figure 1) for the analysis in order of time priority. Block one consists of the exogeneous or input variables and include early cognitions about the Democratic candidate (X_1), early attitude toward the Democratic candidate (X_2) and party identification (X_3). Block two consists of mass media exposure (X_4) and interpersonal communication (X_5). Block three consists of the lagged exogeneous variables,[2] late cognitions about the Democratic candidate (X_6) and late attitudes toward the Democratic candidate (X_7), and block four consists of intention to vote (Y_1).

Product moment correlations were computed between the three variables in block one, between the two variables in block two, and between the two variables in block three.

Third order partials were computed between block one and block two controlling for those variables from each of the blocks that are not included in the correlation. Fifth order partials were computed between block one and block three controlling for those variables from each of these blocks that are not included in the correlation and controlling for the two variables in block two. Sixth order partials were computed between block one and block four controlling for those variables from each of these blocks that are not included in the correlation and controlling for the variables in blocks two and three.

Second order partials were computed between the variables in blocks two and three controlling for those variables from each of these blocks not included in the correlation. Third order partials were computed between the variables in blocks two and four controlling for those variables from each of these blocks not included in the correlation and controlling for those variables in block three. First order partials were computed between the two variables of block three and the one variable in block four controlling for the variable in block three not included in the correlation. The partial correlations are given in Table 1.

If we assume the variables to be linearly related and standardized, the model in Figure 2 can be written:

$$(1)\ X_4 = a + b_2X_2 + E_4$$

$$(2)\ X_5 = a + b_1X_1 + b_3X_2 + E_5$$

$$(3)\ X_6 = a + b_5X_1 + b_7X_4 + b_8X_5 + E_6$$

$$(4)\ X_7 = a + b_6X_1 + b_4X_2 + b_9X_3 + E_7$$

$$(5)\ Y_1 = a + b_{11}X_3 + b_{10}X_7 + E_y$$

Following Blalock's (1969) rule, the equations were identified. Equations (1), (2), and (5) each have five of the seven variables excluded. To be just identified (optimal interpretation) the equation must have no more or fewer variables excluded than there are equations in the set minus one. In the present analysis K - 1 = 4. Equations (1), (2) and (5) are over identified. Equations (3) and (4) each have four variables; they are just identified. Over identified equations permit more than one interpretation,

just identified equations permit only one interpretation, and under identified equations permit no interpretation. Identification of the model indicates it is a special case of a recursive system (Duncan, 1975), and that ordinary least squares (OLS) be used in parameter estimation. The following are the structural equations used for parameter estimation.

$$(1)\quad X_4 = a + b_2X_2 + E_4$$

$$(2)\quad X_5 = a + b_1X_1 + b_3X_2 + E_5$$

$$(3)\quad X_6 = a + b_5\Delta X_1 + b_7\hat{X}_4 + b_8\hat{X}_5 + E_6$$

$$(4)\quad X_7 = a + b_6\Delta X_1 + b_4\Delta X_2 + b_9X_3 + E_7$$

$$(5)\quad Y_1 = a + b_{11}X_3 + b_{10}\hat{X}_7 + E_y$$

Table 2 reports the path coefficients and the correlation matrix for the error or disturbance terms is given in Table 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All path coefficients in the revised model (see Figure 2) are significant. There are significant correlations between the error terms for (1) media exposure and interpersonal communication and between (2) late campaign attitude and intention to vote.

Four paths in the hypothesized model were deleted and three new paths were added. The paths from early cognitions (X_1) to mass media exposure (X_4); from mass media exposure (X_4) to late attitude (X_7); from interpersonal communication (X_5) to late attitude (X_7); and from late cognitions (X_6) to intention to vote (Y_1) were deleted. The paths from early cognitions (X_1) to late cognitions (X_6); from early attitude (X_2) to late attitude (X_7); and from party identification (X_3) to late attitude (X_7) were added.

The lack of a direct path between early cognitions and media exposure appears contrary to earlier findings showing relationships between knowledge and media use, however, there is an indirect effect of cognition on media through interpersonal communication. The positive association between early cognitions and interpersonal communication appears not to support the need for orientation hypothesis. If low levels of information lead to interpersonal communication we would expect a negative path from cognition to interpersonal communication.

One explanation for this apparent anomolous finding is that need for orientation may be relative and exist primarily among those who initially have substantial amounts of information; the information level is high compared with that of other people, but the individual feels he needs even more information. Mullins (1973) found orientation is associated with relatively high information levels, and it may be that incomplete cognitive maps define voters with high information levels while those with less information have virtually no political maps.

Content analysis of the media provides a second explanation. Overall, there was little information available in the media aside from travel schedules

of the candidates. The voter who entered the fall campaign period with a relatively high level of information may have had only the interpersonal channels from which to seek information.

The path from early attitude to media exposure is positive. This suggests the more favorable the attitude prior to the major communications effort of the campaign the more likely the individual is to attend to media content. The negative path from attitude to interpersonal communication indicates that voters talk most about the things they like least about candidates. While the direct effect of early attitude is negative, the indirect effect on interpersonal communication through media exposure is positive. Alternatively, attitudes favorable to the candidate tend to suppress interpersonal communication and lead to increased media exposure, which, in turn, seems to enhance interpersonal communication.

The positive paths from media exposure and interpersonal communication to late cognitions show both direct and indirect effects of the communications channels on knowledge levels. The more activity in the communications channels the more information the voters held about the candidate in October. There was also a significant positive path from early cognitions to late cognitions indicating those with more information early in the campaign also held the most information late in the campaign. This seems to support the interpretation of the need for orientation as a concomitant of relatively high levels of information. The effect of early attitude on late cognitions is indirect through the communications channels and implies a functioning of the selective processes.

There were no direct paths between the communications channels and late attitude. There was a significant path from early attitude to late attitude and a significant negative path from early cognitions to late attitude. The less the voter knew in September, the more favorable he was toward the candidate in October. The direct paths from early cognitions and early attitude to late attitude suggests the voter comes to the fall campaign with a relatively weak cognitive agenda and some fairly clearly defined feelings about the candidates. During the campaign the cognitive agenda is substantially increased, but the attitude structure remains stable, at least in terms of direction. In addition, there is a direct effect of political party preference on late attitude but not on early attitude, early cognitions, or the communications channels.

Media exposure and interpersonal communication have an indirect effect on late attitude through late cognitions. Voters increase their cognitive agenda through both channels and the cognitive function appears to be strongly influenced by the selective processes. Recall that the path from early cognition to late attitude is negative while the paths from early attitudes, late cognitions, and political party preference are positive. As such, message discrimination and information holding seem to be working as reinforcement functions. They provide messages that justify the vote decision already made. To the extent that the selective processes are operating, media agenda-setting is probably not working. This coincides with the findings of McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) that those who were least interested in the election were most susceptible to the agenda-setting effect.

The final path from late attitude toward the candidate to intention to vote suggests that attitude, not knowledge, is the better predictor of how a person is likely to behave in the voting booth. The path is positive and coincides with the positive direct path from party preference to intention

to vote.

The model suggests that the voter has a weak early campaign agenda that specifies, in part, the extent to which the person engages in interpersonal communication and uses the media for political information. While the communications do not appear to alter the voters' attitudes, the cognitive map is changed by the increase in information. However, this increase seems to bear little relationship to what was in the press.[4] The correlation between what the respondents said was in the newspaper and what was observed through content analysis was non-significant, a finding that also argues for a selective exposure interpretation of the model. In addition, 65 per cent of the respondents reported in September that they had made a vote decision, and 75 per cent of the respondents so indicated in late October. As noted above, selective exposure is more likely to occur for those who have made a decision than for those who need information to reach a decision. In terms of the model examined, the implication is that the committed voter is using the media and interpersonal communication to reinforce the voter decision.

In sum, the anlysis does not support a media agenda-setting interpretation of the model. Rather, the data point to a uses and gratifications interpretation based on the apparent operation of the selective processes as a function of early attitude. This is not to argue that no agenda-setting occurred; it is likely that it did occur for some of the uncommitted respondents. However, the bulk of the respondents were committed to a candidate prior to the first interview, and apparently used the communications channels as sources of decision reinforcement.

FOOTNOTES

1. The uses and gratifications and the direct effects model are generally held by their adherents to be distinct from each other and from what has been termed a limited effects of "minimum consequences" model attributed to Klapper's review and interpretation of the literature. However, the uses and gratifications, the direct effects interpretations, and a limited effects outcome all can be derived from the five generalizations about media effects that Klapper presents on pages 8-9 of his book.

2. Christ (1966) notes that using differences (Δt) as variables is equivalent to using lagged variables. In the present analysis:

X_1 and X_2 have been changed to $X_{6_{t-1}}$ and $X_{7_{t-1}}$

where: $t\text{-}1 = (X_6 - X_1)$ and $(X_7 - X_2)$

and Equations (3) and (4) can be rewritten:

$$(3)\quad X_6 = a + b_5(X_6 - X_1) + b_7X_4 + b_8X_5 + E_6$$

$$(4)\quad X_7 = a + b_6X_1 + b_4(X_7 - X_2) + E_7$$

3. A model is said to be recursive if all causal linkages run one way, that is if no two variables are reciprocally related in such a way that each affects and depends upon the other, and no variable "feeds back" upon itself any indirect concatenation of causal linkages. Recursive models do cover the case in which the same variable occurs at two distinct points in time. In that case the two measurements are defined as two variables as is the case with the two attitude and two cognition variables in the present model.

4. Content analysis of a sample of radio and television newscasts indicated there was so little information about the campaign in the broadcast media that it would be virtually impossible for the voters to learn about the candidates and issues from the broadcast media.

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TABLE 1

Matrix of Partial Correlations**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Early cognition		58*	-02	06	21*	39*	-35*	04
2. Early attitude			09	22*	-21*	-09	53*	-06
3. Party Ident.				-03	-02	-14	19*	33*
4. Media Use					37*	21*	15	06
5. Interpersonal Comm.						27*	-09	07
6. Late cognitions							26*	05
7. Late attitudes								56*
8. Vote intention								

* p less than .05

** decimals omitted

TABLE 2

Standardized Path Coefficients for Equations in Figure 2.

Path	Reg. Coef.	Std. Error Coefficient	t-value	Path Coefficient	p LT
42	.81	.23	3.49	.28	.05
51	.23	.07	3.01	.30	.05
52	-.15	.08	-1.75	-.18	.05
61	.99	.006	156.55	1.01	.05
64	.81	.007	101.09	.59	.05
65	4.28	.03	130.50	.81	.05
73	.32	.18	1.72	.08	.05
72	.95	.06	15.85	.84	.05
71	.51	.06	7.70	.41	.05
Y3	.23	.07	3.27	.23	.05
Y7	.16	.02	7.04	.50	.05

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Residuals of Endogenous Variables For Five Structural Equations

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Mass Media	1.000	.354*	.009	-.065	.100
2. Interpersonal		1.000	-.038	.027	.140
3. Late Cognition			1.000	-.064	.061
4. Late Attitude				1.000	.310*
5. Vote Intention					1.000

* p less than .05

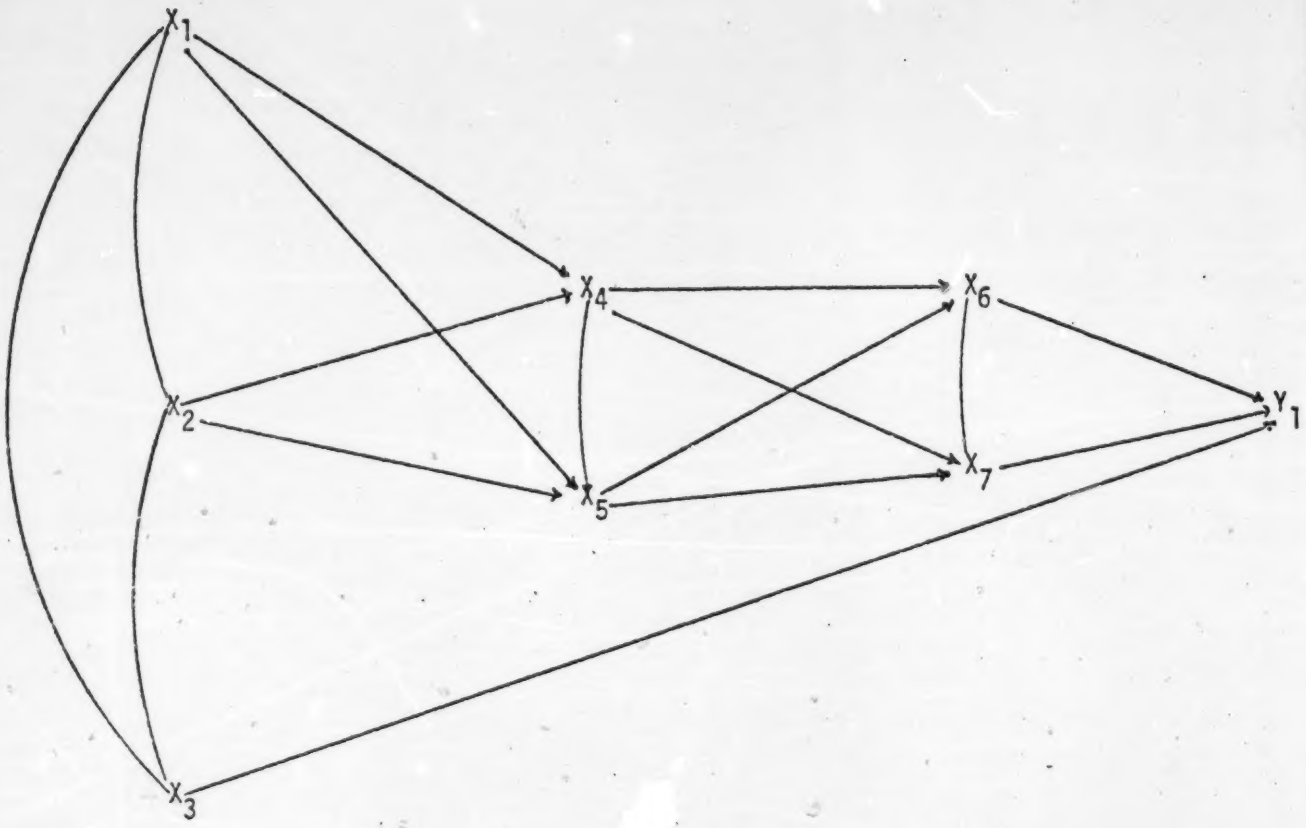

FIGURE 1: Path Diagram of Hypothesized Model.

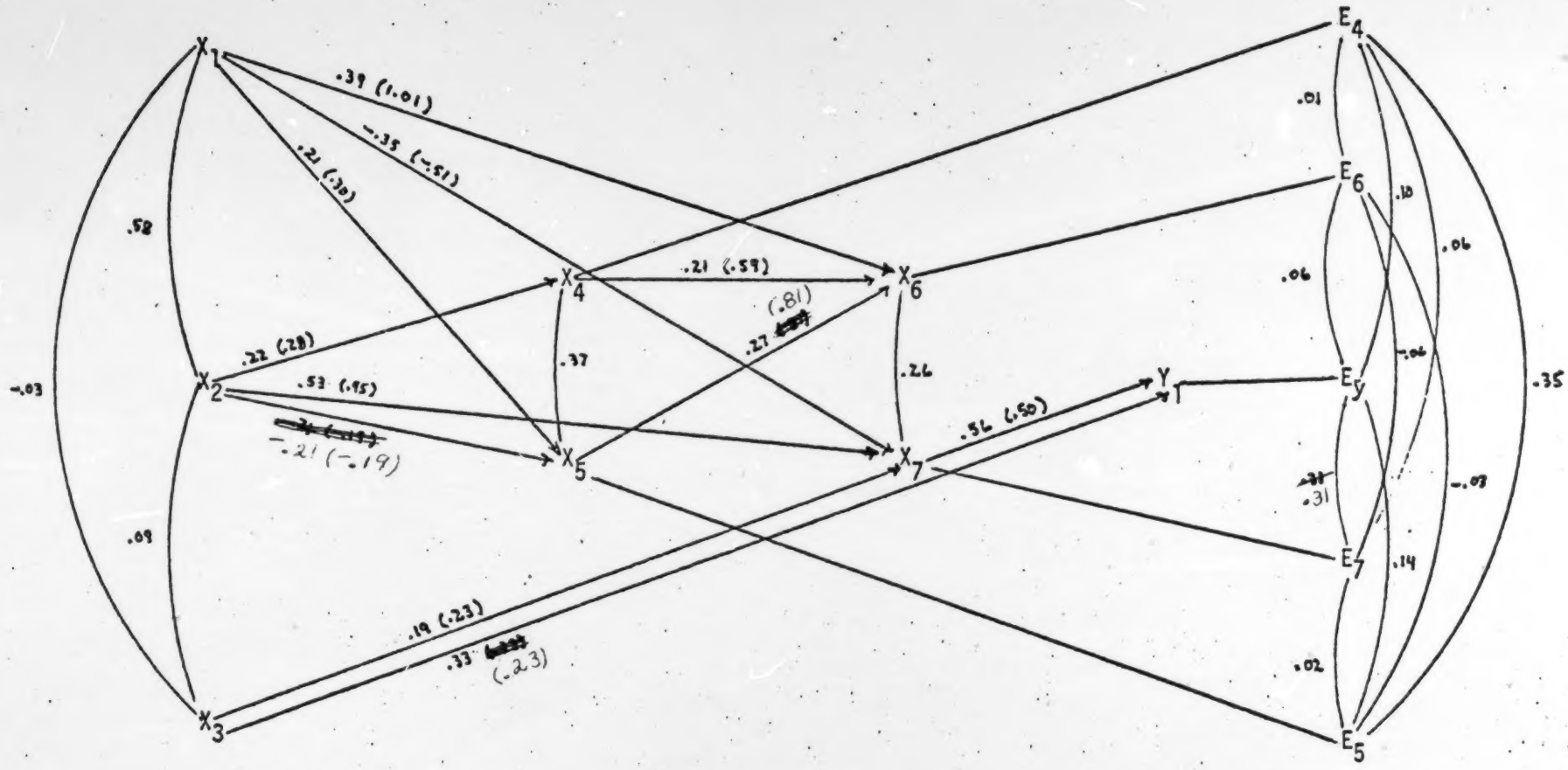

FIGURE 2: Path Diagram of Revised Model with Partial Correlations and Path Coefficients (in parenthesis).